

I. FOCUS ON THE PROPER ISSUES

Professional hockey is an extremely fast and physical game. Confrontation is inevitable. Of concern recently is the issue of fisticuffs/competition. The real issue is the illegal tactics that lead to fisticuffs/confrontation. Elimination of slashing, interference, spearing, cross-checking etc., that leads to frustration, in confrontation, will reduce fisticuffs.

* ACTION THAT LEADS TO CONFRONTATION MUST BE DISTINGUISHED. A good defensive player is never a detriment to the game. Admirable defensive skills are accepted and condoned. Bob Gainey is a Hall of Famer. There is a distinction, however, between a good defensive player legitimately containing the opposition and a player who resorts to the use of illegal tactics to contain a skilled player. Nevertheless, it is the illegal tactics that have increased and these tactics which have led to frustration that results in a player responding in kind.

* MARIO LEMEUX DID NOT BREAK HIS HAND IN A FIGHT. The hand was broken by a slash - a tactic that must be eradicated. When Mario Lemieux, Pavel Bure etc. are injured through illegal tactics or respond in kind then something is wrong with the game.

* MR. BALDWIN DOES NOT DISTINGUISH FISTICUFFS FROM SPEARING, SLASHING, BUTT ENDING AND CROSS-CHECKING. Spearing, cross-checking, butt ending etc. are deliberate attempts to injure and yet, the new proposal only exacts a five minute penalty for such infractions. These are the very infractions/illegal tactics that demand a player be ejected from the game. The new proposal in essence, rewards a player who slashes Mario Lemieux with only a five minute penalty. Fisticuffs and stickwork cannot be lumped together.

* THE NORTH AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY IN SPORTS FAVOURS THE MAN WHO STANDS UP FOR HIMSELF. He is applauded if he confronts a wrong. The issue comes down to what kind of confrontation is desirable? Hockey players carry weapons. Is the player who is frustrated by illegal tactics to respond with an accepted, safe and natural release of emotions through fisticuffs, or is he to resort to stickwork.

* WE MUST REWARD PLAYERS FOR GOOD CONDUCT AND PENALIZE THEM FOR ILLEGAL CONDUCT. Eliminate the pattern where the player must restrain himself for a better part of the game before he retaliates or fights in frustration. The player should be rewarded for not retaliating long before he has to.

A player who slashes or cross-checks or spears a player etc. and then who skates away is often labelled a disciplined player because he did not fight when challenged. This is a fallacy. This player should be ejected for his attempts to hurt another player.

II. THE EFFECT ON THE GAME OF HOCKEY

In a game of confrontation, where fisticuffs is prohibited, players will respond with stickwork when frustrated. The sticks will come up. The corollary to this is that face shields will go on. Nobody will be seriously hurt initially but officials may be more willing to let things go because players will still need to battle for territory. Over the long run, serious injury (spinal) will occur from the increased use of cross-checks and high sticks in the head area and from behind.

* WHEN THERE IS NO FEAR THERE IS NO RESPECT - WHEN THERE IS NO RESPECT THE RULES DO NOT MATTER. The game will slow down. Penalties will be called all night, or not called - the highsticking, interference, slashing and cross-check will slow the game down. Injuries will slow the game down, jeopardize careers and cost money.

* WHAT IS A FIGHT? HOW WILL IT BE DEFINED? How can one describe it in the future? If fisticuffs are prohibited and two players fight with their gloves on is it a fight? Is it roughing? Are they ejected?

* AN EXCITING, FAST, PHYSICAL GAME MAY TURN INTO A VIOLENT GAME. There must be better vision. More stickwork and illegal tactics will create a violent game. On occasion, during back-to-back sequences of games, the last five minutes is pay-back time or set-up time for the next game. Stickwork may be the method in the future.

III. MARKETING

There has been a trend toward tactical intimidation and illegal tactics. This is acknowledged and rules have been promulgated and implemented to rectify the problem. Fisticuffs have been addressed through the instigator penalty, ejection for multiple fights, clearing the fisticuffs area, and third man in. Stickwork and illegal tactics must now be addressed.

* MR. BALDWIN TIES FISTICUFFS AND SLASHING TOGETHER AS BEHAVIOUR THAT PREVENTS NHL HOCKEY FROM GROWING, BUT NHL FANS HAVE DISTINGUISHED FISTICUFFS FROM SLASHING. Spontaneous fisticuffs is viewed by hockey fans as an outlet of emotion in an aggressive sport and is accepted by the players as part of the game. Whereas, slashing and stick related fouls have never been accepted by NHL fans, players or management.

* FISTICUFFS IS ONE FACTOR AMONG MANY THAT CREATES THE UNIQUENESS AND POPULARITY OF NHL HOCKEY. Hockey fans stand up for two occurrences - goals and fisticuffs.

* WHAT KIND OF GAME WILL BE CREATED IF FISTICUFFS IS ELIMINATED. The NHL plays to ninety-two percent (92%) capacity. This indicates that season ticketholders, the casual fan, and sports fan in general like the game as is. It is highly skilled, aggressive and a good product. NHL fans enjoy it live and on TV. Seventy percent (70%) of season ticketholders view spontaneous fisticuffs as acceptable aggression. They do not want to see crosschecking, highsticking, slashing and premeditated behavior, yet it has increased. If fisticuffs are removed the fans will see more of what he or she does not want to pay for.

* THE NHL GAME WILL RESEMBLE EUROPEAN HOCKEY IF FISTICUFFS ARE REMOVED. Europeans cannot sell their game either live or on TV. This is the very reason why all European teams want NHL participation in their tournaments. While the NHL has adopted many things from the European game that are good, Europeans have adopted the physical part of the NHL game. There are bigger, stronger Europeans joining the NHL every year. (ie. Ulf Samuelsson).

* THE ATTRACTION TO NHL HOCKEY IS THE SKILL AND PHYSICALITY OF THE SPORT. NHL fans regard hockey players as more skilled than those of any other sport. According to the Goldfarb Report, NHL hockey is not accepted in ie. New Mexico not as a result of a distaste for fisticuffs but, because NHL hockey is not marketed well enough. How can people be turned off by a hockey fight if they have never seen the game?

* THERE IS A COMMON MISCONCEPTION THAT THE NHL CANNOT ATTRACT A NATIONAL TV CONTRACT AS A RESULT OF FISTICUFFS. Yet Molsons, who is a franchise owner, a TV producer and a Rights holder want fisticuffs in the game. Joel Nixon stated that "no network executive ever told him that fisticuffs was an impediment to a National TV Contract." The Hockey News, July 13, 1992.

* IDENTITY OF PLAYERS WILL BE LOST. IF FISTICUFFS ARE ELIMINATED STICKS WILL GO UP FACE MASKS AND SHIELDS WILL GO ON. To market the NHL game players must be recognized and this will not occur if they are wearing face masks and shields.

IV. CONCLUSION

The National Hockey League has made incremental changes vis-a-vis fisticuffs in the past and based on their success should continue to do so. The League must make drastic changes in illegal tactics and stickwork. A drastic change based simply on empirical study without so much as a feasibility study is too risky. This is a business. With player salaries and costs increasing exponentially some member clubs are riding a tenuous line between fiscal failure and success. This is not the time to experiment. Elimination of fisticuffs may be a disaster for the National Hockey League and once removed will be impossible to reinstate without a media backlash.

Hockey fans have told us in Goldfarb what they do not want in the game. The fans like our game, a skillful, physical game where a spontaneous fight is acceptable and exciting. The fans want to eliminate the premeditated behaviour. Spontaneous fighting has always been an accepted part of our basic product. The premeditated behaviour ie. the "hit" man and the stick work are a product of expansion and it has continued to grow. The basic product must not be changed. There is too much risk to our business. The issue is to remove the unacceptable premeditated behaviour not to change the product and risk unknown damage to the business.